

10/11/91

NEW
YORK
TIMES

A Strong Voice for California Latinos

A-8

By SETH MYDANS
Special to The New York Times

10/11/91 NYT

LOS ANGELES, Oct. 10 — When her chief antagonist on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors called her an anarchist at a hearing last month, Gloria Molina, the newest rising star among the nation's Hispanic elected officials, made no objection.

"You can't just join the club and tell people, 'Be patient, things will change,'" Ms. Molina said in an interview at her office a few days later. "You need to confront issues. I got here and I better start getting to work. And very frankly, that usually means stepping on the toes of my colleagues."

Ms. Molina, who is 43 years old, became the first Hispanic supervisor on the five-member board in March, and has moved aggressively since then to consolidate her reputation as one who speaks out strongly for minority rights.

A Powerful Local Office

Ms. Molina's election to one of the nation's most powerful local offices, helping to oversee a county that has a population of 9 million and a budget of \$12 billion, automatically elevated her to national prominence. The Board of

Supervisors is the highest political echelon in the county, which includes the City of Los Angeles.

"I think she is going to be one of a handful of people who really shines," said Harry Pachon, the director of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, citing her commitment to issues of importance to minorities. "The Latino community in California has tremendous influence on the Latino community nationwide, simply because one of three Latinos nationwide lives in California."

Hispanic people in the United States make up 8 percent of the nation's population, but they are everely underrepresented politically; they account for only about 3 percent of the nation's elected officials.

The 4,201 Hispanic elected officials at all levels of government include 10 United States Representatives, 9 state officials and 131 state legislators, according to Mr. Pachon's organization. There are no Hispanic senators or governors.

Voting-Rights Challenges

By far the greatest number of Hispanic officials are in Texas, which has 1,969, partly as a result of a decade of Federal court challenges based on the Voting Rights Act. New Mexico has 672 Hispanic officials, California 617, Arizona 282 and New York 76.

Sergio Munoz, editor of the Los Angeles-based daily newspaper La Opinión, said Ms. Molina had wisely chosen to concentrate on the needs of her electoral constituency. "The most important thing is that she has truly been the voice of a community that didn't have any access to the Board of Supervisors," he said. "And it's a loud voice and a gutsy voice."

But he added: "The danger for many Hispanic leaders is that they represent a community that feels victimized in many ways, and a community that does not have many outlets. 'If you follow and if you act in accordance with the desperate cry of this community, then you put in jeopardy your political

future because the business elite, the political muscle of the city and all the powers of the city may see you as a threatening force."

During the interview Ms. Molina made no secret of her ambition to become mayor of Los Angeles, but she said: "I wish I could go and kind of apply for the job. I'm not so sure I would be successful running for it."

Successful Political Style

Ms. Molina, the Los Angeles-born daughter of an immigrant Mexican laborer, said that at first she thought she was too opinionated to be a politician.

But she quickly became the first Hispanic member of the State Assembly, the lower house of the California Legislature, and then became the first Hispanic member of the Los Angeles City Council, where her aggressive style sometimes turned political allies into personal opponents.

Nevertheless, Mr. Munoz said, Ms. Molina has had surprising success as a legislator, redirecting resources toward health care, crime and urban planning. In her first six months as a county supervisor, he added, "It is my understanding that she has proposed about 40 motions and that there are less than five that have been rejected."

Ms. Molina said: "I hear people say, 'She's loud but she's not effective — she has a need to confront.' That's totally untrue. It's a style that makes my colleagues uncomfortable, but it works. It works all the time."

A Shift to the Left

Almost from her first day as a county supervisor Ms. Molina has challenged the way business has been done, raising uncomfortable questions about the budget process, blocking a pay increase for herself and her colleagues and trying unsuccessfully to get them and their staff members to take an unpaid two-day leave so that more money could be made available for

health programs.

Her election to the Board of Supervisors tilted the balance on the board toward the liberals, and Ms. Molina has had an opportunity to advance her agenda. She helped pass a measure that would offer \$300 million in county contracts to businesses owned by women or members of minorities. She also helped hire additional employees to cut the waiting time at welfare offices and an AIDS clinic.

Recognizing the new political dynamics, the county's Chief Administrative Officer, Richard B. Dixon, for the first time in a decade, proposed a budget that did not cut funds for health programs, including mental health.

And for the first time, in a county where 30 percent of the population speaks Spanish, Ms. Molina has made it possible for people to testify in Spanish at board hearings.

Speaking with characteristic dismissiveness of her new colleagues on the board, Ms. Molina said: "They are accustomed to having two-hour meetings, silent meetings. I like meetings to have some passion."

Some members of the board's staff contend that this passion may be a deliberate screen to cover the political compromises that are required of any legislator, particularly of a legislator who has come to office representing an impatient constituency.



Bart Bartholomew for The New York Times

Gloria Molina, a member of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors.

Response to a Shooting

It was during a heated discussion over an issue that Mr. Munoz said epitomized her delicate political position that Ms. Molina drew the epithet "anarchist" from the board's chairman, Michael D. Antonovich, a conservative Republican.

When members of the county sheriff's department recently shot and killed four people, including a Hispanic man at a housing project, Ms. Molina faced angry calls from local Hispanic groups demanding aggressive action.

Her constituents criticized her for failing to return from a vacation after the shooting at the project and for failing to call immediately for an independent investigation of the sheriff's department.

At a hearing on the issue, Ms. Molina and Mr. Antonovich became involved in an angry tug-of-war over which one had the right to speak. When he tried to rule her out of order, she suggested that he might do better to resign the chairmanship.

"If you want to be an anarchist," Mr. Antonovich responded, "you can be an anarchist."

Los Angeles